

“Not a Wandering or Unruly License”: Christian Liberty Then and Now

I. Introduction

We American evangelicals like to think we know a thing or two about Christian liberty. Christian liberty is that thing that we understand that our benighted fundamentalist brothers and sisters do not—I know of what I speak; I grew up just down the road from Bob Jones University. Christian liberty is what we invoke to explain why it’s cool for us to listen to music or watch movies that might raise a few eyebrows among our more strait-laced church friends. Christian liberty enables us to dress casual when we feel like it, even for church. Christian liberty even allows us to get that tattoo that’ll really shock Mom but impress the girlfriend. For Reformed Christians, Christian liberty can have all kinds of extra perks. It’s what enables us to drink a good porter or IPA with our burger rather than Dr. Pepper. It’s what enables us to smoke cigars on the back porch rather than sipping lemonade—while playing poker, no less!

For Americans in particular, the allure of Christian liberty is difficult to resist. After all, liberty is our national watchword. It’s what we fought the Revolution for, and, if you drink the nationalist Kool-aid deeply enough, what we’ve fought all ninety-nine wars since for. The American way of life has come to be defined as the liberty to drive the car you want to drive, wherever you want to drive it, eat the food you want to eat, wear the clothes you want to wear, live wherever you want with whoever you want, love and marry whoever you want. No wonder that it seemed like such a no-brainer for our culture, once the question was posed, if that “whoever you want” should be extended to include either gender, to shrug and say, “Sure, why not?”

This expansive and self-justifying concept of liberty has proven to be a heady draft indeed, more intoxicating than any Imperial Stout down at the Reformed brewpub. As Protestant Christians living in America, and sharing its mantra of freedom, it is all too easy for us to confuse the freedom for which Christ has set us free with the many-layered and constantly-evolving notion of freedom that is part of our American creed. The first systematic statement of the doctrine of Christian liberty that I have come across, in a 1566 document whose ponderous title I will omit for the moment, opens with a stern

rebuke to any such conflation: “Christian liberty is not a wandering and unruly license, by which we may do or leave undone whatsoever we list [i.e., wish] at our pleasure.” Indeed, it may surprise us, when we turn to study the Reformation, just how far off their notion of Christian liberty was from our own. Those who loudly trumpeted the freedom of a Christian believed in stern governmental regulation of trade and banking, in many cases calling for total bans on usury. They believed in required church attendance for everyone in a given city or even realm, usually with a prescribed liturgy that was more or less the same in every church. They believed in so-called sumptuary laws, restricting what was deemed to be exorbitant spending or luxurious display in matters of food and clothing in particular. The list, needless to say, goes on.

Now your first instinct might be to say, “Well sure, I guess they were so used to oppression and all that back then that even just a little loosening up must felt like wild liberty to them.” Perhaps, but the contrast goes deeper than that. For it’s not as if there weren’t some people back there in the sixteenth century saying, “Well hey, now that we have Christian liberty and all, I guess we can worship however we want wherever we want and dress and eat however we want, etc.” There were, but the Reformers actually at times went out of their way to insist that this is not what they meant by Christian liberty; it was something else altogether.

II. Christian Liberty in Modern Evangelicalism

But before we say more about what it was for the Reformers (a topic that shall occupy us for the bulk of this paper), let me stop and sketch a bit more what I think modern Christians frequently understand by the term, to help make clearer some of the tensions and contrasts I will later draw attention to.

Let’s first use the example of a prominent Reformed evangelical pastor whom I know well, Doug Wilson. Wilson makes the doctrine of Christian liberty a regular feature of his preaching and pastoring, and usually in a way that is quite helpful as a response to the petty legalisms and hypocrisies that so readily proliferate among evangelicals—as indeed among humans generally. Sometimes, however, his crusade against legalism leads him to statements of Christian liberty that seem a bit overreaching. Consider a sermon preached on May 30, 2010, where, in a denunciation of foodie and fairtrade culture, Rev.

Wilson declared, “The Triune God of Scripture doesn’t care. Bacon is fine. . . . Oysters are fine. Refined sugar is fine. Processed stuff made out of something that used to be like corn is fine . . . As far as God’s concerned, Fairtrade coffee is fine, rip-off trade coffee is fine . . . God doesn’t care what’s on the plate, God cares what’s in the heart.”¹

This insistence, that Christian liberty meant that it didn’t matter what you bought or ate, and anyone who said otherwise was peddling Pharisaism and idolatry, was a common theme of Wilson’s during this period. And to be sure, he had a point. Food fads can turn into little food religions, or moralistic crusades by which one hopes to earn brownie points with God. Moreover, in asserting that “God doesn’t care what’s on the plate, God cares what’s in the heart,” he was giving voice to one of Luther’s most important proclamations in the Reformation—that we are justified by faith, rather than works, and that the works that we do in faith are pleasing to God *only because* done in faith. Luther, in his *Treatise on Good Works*, can say things as shocking as anyone in this regard:

Now every one can note and tell for himself when he does what is good or what is not good; for if he finds his heart confident that it pleases God, the work is good, even if it were so small a thing as picking up a straw. If confidence is absent, or if he doubts, the work is not good, although it should raise all the dead and the man should give himself to be burned.²

In this faith all works become equal, and one is like the other; all distinctions between works fall away, whether they be great, small, short, long, few or many. For the works are acceptable not for their own sake, but because of the faith which alone is, works and lives in each and every work without distinction.³

This is what I have, in my research, designated the “soteriological” notion of indifference: from the standpoint of meriting God’s favor, all works are, considered in themselves, indifferent and inconsequential. Anyone who is approaching their eating or

¹ Doug Wilson, “Organic or Non-Organic? Does God Care?”

² *LW* 44:25.

³ *LW* 44:26.

shopping habits with Pharisaical notions in mind is bound to be disappointed, and deserves rebuke. But obviously, a great many Christians, when asking, “Should I go to McDonald’s or buy organic beef from a local cooperative? Should I buy Fairtrade coffee or rip-off trade coffee?” are not asking such a soteriologically-tinged question. They are asking a moral question, about what, within the realm of the limited and relative goods which we are called to seek in history, is the greatest good or the least evil, so that they can better honor God, his creation, and their neighbor. Luther himself was certainly not above addressing such moral questions, including within the pages of the *Treatise on Good Works*, and most of his successors were deeply concerned with such questions. Does our freedom in Christ from moralistic self-justification, then, really free us from moral deliberation?

This, however, raises another set of questions altogether. After all, haven’t we been given a guidebook for moral deliberation, a guidebook that tells us everything we need to know for faith and practice—the Holy Scriptures? Thus we arrive at another common concept of Christian liberty, one that is perhaps even more widespread than the former (since most of us, when we stop and think about it, prefer to steer clear of full-blown antinomianism). This concept, which I call the “epistemological concept of indifference” (because it has to do with how we *know* right from wrong) reasons as follows: there are many things that Scripture clearly forbids, and many more things that Scripture clearly requires of faithful Christians. And then there are any number of things on which it does neither—perhaps it offers some prudential guidance one way or another, but nothing binding and absolute. These, then, are “things indifferent,” things on which Christians should feel free to conduct themselves however they wish, and on which no one should dare to bind them, lest consciences be subjected to a bondage that Christ has released them from.

An interesting example of this epistemological concept of Christian liberty can be found in the work of another provocative Reformed evangelical pastor a few years ago, one who has subsequently fallen from grace somewhat: Mark Driscoll. In their book, *Real Marriage*, Mark and Grace Driscoll decide not to be coy in chapter 10, entitled, “Can We ... ?” Few Christian books have hidden quite so much behind an ellipsis. In the chapter, they consider a range of sexual practices ranging from the commonplace to the

controversial to the frankly somewhat deviant and ask whether or not they fall within the realm of Christian liberty. The framework that they offer for evaluating such practices is more than a little confusing. They begin with what appears to be the full-blown soteriological concept of indifference, invoking 1 Cor. 6:12, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any,” and then proposing a threefold rubric for Christian sexual morality: 1) Is it lawful? 2) Is it helpful? 3) Is it enslaving?⁴ This is puzzling first because most scholars seem to now believe that when Paul says, “All things are lawful for me,” he is quoting a Corinthian Christian slogan rather than offering his own mantra for Christian liberty. But it is more puzzling because if this assertion is to be taken at face value, then it is not clear why you would need to ask question 1—“is it lawful?” at all. But be that as it may, the Driscolls do ask that question and almost every time they answer it, they find themselves answering “Why yes, I suppose so.”⁵ Their criterion, after all, is the epistemological concept of indifference—does the Bible forbid it? And since the Bible is strangely silent on the subject of sex toys, well, they are clearly indifferent.

Now, in their defense, the Driscolls do offer some thoughtful remarks on questions 2 and 3—“is it helpful? and “is it enslaving?” But the most they are able to do here is offer some suggestions for how individual couples can decide whether a sexual practice is right for them or not, a very 21st-century American understanding of liberty indeed!

If I may take a hard right turn from 21st-century evangelical pastors talking about sex to 19th-century Presbyterians talking about, well, the sorts of things Presbyterians argue about (in this case, whether denominations can create mission boards), this epistemological approach to Christian liberty, when left on its own, can generate an interesting corollary: “if Scripture has not positively commanded something, no authority can command it; if Scripture has not forbidden something, no authority can forbid it” Why? Because then we would find our Christian liberty abridged—we would *have* to do, or *have* to avoid, something that Scripture left us free to do or not do. Now, obviously, without any qualification, such a proposition would entail complete anarchy—as Richard

⁴ Mark and Grace Driscoll, *Real Marriage* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 178.

⁵ See, for instance, pp. 182, 185-86.

Hooker memorably put when confronted with the claim by English Puritans as early as the 1570s,

This opinion, even if applied no further than to this particular issue, shakes the universal fabric of government; leads to anarchy and confusion; dissolves families; dissipates colleges, corporations, and armies; overthrows kingdoms, churches, and anything that is now, according to God's providence, upheld by power and authority.⁶

Accordingly, those proposing the claim tended to insist that it applied only to ecclesiastical matters—which, of course, as Hooker recognized, was somewhat question-begging, because it required prior agreement on what ought to be deemed ecclesiastical concerns vs. civil concerns (a matter of live debate even now). James Henley Thornwell was the leading exponent of this opinion in the 19th-century debate, insisting on “the freedom of Christians from the tyranny of the church speaking where Scripture is silent.”⁷ Note here that the restriction has been broadened from the church *commanding* where Scripture is silent to even *speaking*, since authoritative speech would risk restraining our freedom. Indeed, the principle also entailed that the church as institution or community could not *act at all* outside the direct warrant of Scripture, since such communal action (establishing a certain order of worship, or appointing a denominational mission board) would require the members of the church to participate in certain activities that Scripture had left free. Of course, in such a situation, one could respond that Christians who didn't like the practice could just up and leave to another congregation or denomination (not something a *jure divino* Presbyterian like Thornwell could consider). And this is more or less how modern evangelicalism has handled it—if your church does something you don't like, your Christian liberty allows (maybe even requires) you to head elsewhere.

III. Christian Liberty in the Reformation

Let us contrast this notion of Christian liberty with the circumstances that gave rise to the document I quoted earlier, “Christian liberty is not a wandering and unruly license, by which we may do or leave undone whatsoever we list [i.e., wish] at our

⁶ *Laws* V.71.4 (modernization).

⁷ Thornwell, “Speech on African Colonization,” in *Collected Writings* 4:472–73.

pleasure.” The full title of this document, *Propositions or articles framed for the use of the Dutch Church in London, and approved by the Church of Geneva, for the putting an end to long controversies among the members of that Church: being also very profitable to be setforth in these days, wherein new congregations do spring up*, is quintessentially sixteenth-century, a warning to the reader that we are about to enter a different thought-world.

The document emerged out a congregation known as the Dutch Stranger Church, a group of Dutch Reformed exiles from Holland who were living in London during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. After a dispute over baptismal liturgy led some members of the congregation to assert their Christian liberty and question the authority of the ministers, the dominant party, led by Gottfried van Wingen, drew up a set of twenty-one articles setting forth what they took to be the magisterial Protestant understanding of Christian liberty. These articles argued strongly for the spiritual nature of Christian liberty and the responsibility of individual Christians to submit to ecclesiastical and civil authorities when it came to the regulation of **adiaphora**. Van Wingen submitted it to the review of the leaders of Reformed churches in Heidelberg, Bern, Lausanne, Zurich, and Geneva, from which it received general, though not unanimous approval; Theodore Beza in particular suggested some extensive clarifying amendments. The final draft, incorporating many of these suggestions, was submitted to Edmund Grindal, who, as Bishop of London had jurisdiction over the Stranger Churches. Pleased at its contents, seeing its relevance to the ongoing Vestments controversy in England, and recognizing its value as a pan-Reformed consensus statement on these issues, he had it published.⁸ Although little-discussed by historians,

⁸ At least, so claims John Strype, in his *Life and Acts of Archbishop Edmund Grindal* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1821 [1710]). He explains that Grindal encouraged the Dutch congregation to make these propositions public, recognizing that they “might serve to satisfy those of the English Church in these days, that scrupled submission in the ecclesiastical appointments about the ceremonies. They were printed by Jugg, printer to the Queen’s Majesty, in Latin and English” (190). However, the only publication of these articles that I have been able to locate appeared in 1647: *XXXII Propositions or Articles, Subscribed By severall Reformed Churches, and Concurred in by divers godly Ministers of the City of London* (London: Robert Ibbisson, 1647). Strype reprints the articles in Appendix XVIII to his *Life and Acts* (pp. 519–27), and I used his version in the quotations here. Noting that this version represents the articles after the incorporation of proposed amendments from Theodore Beza, R.W. Dixon offers the originals in Latin, with Beza’s comments interspersed in translation (taken from Epistle 24 of Beza’s *Letters*), in *History of the Church of England from the Abolition of the Roman Jurisdiction*, vol. 6, *Elizabeth, A.D. 1564–1570* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902), 186–89.

and none at all by historical theologians as far as I have seen, it is endlessly fascinating and illuminating.

The first article, which we quoted from above, reads in full:

Christian liberty is not a wandering and unruly licence, by which we may do or leave undone whatsoever we list at our pleasure; but it is a free gift bestowed upon us by Christ our Lord; by the which, the children of God (that is, all the faithful), being delivered from the curse of the law, or eternal death, and from the heavy yoke of the ceremonial law, and being endowed with the Holy Ghost, begin willingly of their own accord to serve God in holiness and righteousness.

Now that's a bit different than what we've been discussing thus far. According to this statement, Christian liberty has nothing to do with what we "may do or leave undone" in the realm of action, but has to do entirely with the realm of conscience. It is a freedom of conscience before God from the crushing burden of works-righteousness. In short, it sounds a lot like the Protestant doctrine of justification. And indeed, this is how John Calvin describes it in the *Institutes*. Calvin begins his chapter on Christian liberty by calling it "a thing of prime necessity," apart from which "consciences dare undertake almost nothing without doubting." Indeed, the doctrine is an "appendage of justification and is of no little avail in understanding its power."⁹ The context is not epistemological—how we know what we can and can't do, and our freedom to act in the absence of clear Biblical commands or prohibitions—but soteriological. Christian liberty has to do with the believer's *justification*, his freedom from the bondage of external works.

Calvin expounds three different elements to the doctrine:

The first: that the consciences of believers, in seeking assurance of their justification before God, should rise above and advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness. . . .

The second part, dependent upon the first, is that consciences observe the law, not as if constrained by the necessity of the law, but that freed from the law's yoke they willingly obey God's will. For since they dwell in

⁹ *Institutes* III.19.1 (1:833).

perpetual dread so long as they remain under the sway of the law, they will never be disposed with eager readiness to obey God unless they have already been given this sort of freedom. . . .

The third part of Christian freedom lies in this: regarding outward things that are of themselves “indifferent” [*adiaphora*], we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently.¹⁰

To this extent, Doug Wilson’s soteriological emphasis seems on track as far as it goes; in matters of food and drink, the conscience should be free of any legalistic attempts at self-justification before God. Indeed, are not any attempts to say what a believer should or shouldn’t eat—whether this be a 16th-century command to fast during Lent or a 21st-century demand to avoid cage-raised chickens—a violation of this third part of Christian freedom, imposing a “religious obligation” on the consciences of believers? Well, Calvin himself didn’t think so, asserting that if someone is obliged to abstain from meat for their entire life out of regard for their neighbor’s weakness, they are not on that account any less free.¹¹ When Calvin says we are not bound by any “religious obligation,” he means that quite specifically; in principle, churches could continue to impose medieval Lenten practice if it was simply to cultivate self-discipline rather than as a divine command (though of course in practice, Calvin would have advocated steering as clear as possible from a practice that might be misunderstood by Christians just coming out of popish bondage). In short, the Reformers emphatically denied that any outward regulation of indifferent matters, by either church or civil authorities, necessarily entailed such legalism. On this, the second article of the Dutch confession is nothing short of shocking to modern ears:

II. How this liberty is transgressed

Therefore, sith that he which is the son of God is ruled by the Spirit of God, and that the same Spirit commandeth us, we should obey all ordinances of man (that is, all politic order, whereof the magistrate is the

¹⁰ *Institutes* III.19.2, 4, 7 (1:834, 836, 838).

¹¹ *Institutes* III.19.10 (1:842).

guardian), and all superiors, which watch for the health of our souls; yea, and that according to our vocation we should diligently procure the safeguard of our neighbour; it followeth, that that man abuseth the benefit of Christian liberty, or rather, is yet sold under sin, who doth not willingly obey either his magistrate or superior in the Lord, or doth not endeavour to edify the conscience of his brother.

Christian liberty is transgressed *not* by human authorities imposing extra-biblical regulations on us, but by us *failing to obey them*. Ok, but it also says that we are to endeavor to edify the conscience of our neighbor. Isn't that something that each Christian needs to decide for themselves? And to this extent, although Christian liberty is not a "wandering and unruly license," bound as it is to love of neighbor, it is something that authorities in church and state should not determine for us, right? And indeed, the fourth article of the Dutch confession, speaking of conscience, says "that every faithful man by that revealed word doth examine and weigh with himself, both what he doth, and also what he letteth undone, that he may judge of them both, which is just, and which is unjust." However, the third article says that "what is profitable to edify, and what is not, is not to be determined by the judgment of the common people, or of some simple man, nor yet by the issue of men's actions."

To be sure, there are many things commanded in God's Word, which must by definition edify and thus must be done by any faithful Christian, and many things forbidden in God's Word, which by definition do not edify and must be avoided. But beyond these are the large sphere of "things indifferent," the subject of the fifth article. These are "those, which by themselves, being simply considered in their own nature, are neither good nor bad, as meat and drink, and such like; in the which therefore, it is said, that the kingdom of God consisteth not; and that therefore a man may use them well or evil." Here we seem to have found the concept employed by the Driscolls and a large number of modern evangelicals—most things out there are not good or evil in themselves; it's a matter of how you use them, and this use should be left up to individual Christian conscience. Well, van Wingen and Co. certainly didn't think so. Article VI explains:

Things otherwise indifferent of themselves, after a sort change their nature, when by some commandment they are either commanded or forbidden. Because, neither they can be omitted contrary to the commandment, if they are once commanded, neither omitted contrary to prohibition, if they be prohibited; as appeareth in the ceremonial law.

At first it might appear that the document means only that God himself can at certain times and places take away the intrinsic indifference belonging to some practice and make it binding or forbidden. As Richard Hooker later says, “Many fashions of Priestly attire there were, whereof Aaron and his sons might have had their free choice without sin, but that God expressly tied them unto one” (*Laws* II.4.4). But the Dutch articles go on to make clear that human authorities too, inasmuch as they exercise authority by the ordinance of God, and in his place, can similarly limit our freedom in things indifferent. This is spelled out in the crucial Article IX:

Specially, the use of these things is forbidden by ecclesiastical or civil decree. For although that only God doth properly bind the conscience of man, yet in respect, that either the magistrate, who is God's Minister, doth think it profitable for the commonwealth, that something, otherwise of itself lawful, be not done, or that the Church, having regard to order, comeliness, and also edifying, do make some laws concerning indifferent things, those laws are altogether to be observed of the godly, and do so far forth bind the conscience, that no man wittingly and willingly, with a stubborn mind, may, without sin, either do those things which are forbidden, or omit those things which are commanded.

The “wittingly and willingly” here is crucial. These things are *as such* indifferent, so it is not as if the mere doing of the action can render a Christian guilty. For instance, imagine that you, as I do, attend a church where it is the custom to partake of the bread and wine at communion as soon as you receive them while they are being passed around. Imagine you wander into a church where it is the custom to wait until everyone is served and then all partake together, but don't realize this, and gobble up your bread as soon as

you receive it, only to find yourself sitting there awkwardly two minutes later when everyone else eats theirs. (I have done this on more occasions than I care to count.) In such a case, you have done nothing sinful. But if you recognize that's this church's policy, and stubbornly insist on doing it the way you are accustomed to do anyway, then, according to these Dutch articles at least, you are sinning, because you are scorning the God-given authority of this church's officers to make determinations in matters indifferent for the sake of good order and edification. This is probably not too hard to understand; if you are just being contrary, after all, that is a sinful attitude. But what if you were a cranky Reformed dude, and had some elaborate theological rationale for why partaking right when you receive was the most appropriate way to commune? In this case, you were flaunting this particular church's custom not just to be contrary, but because you were obeying God rather than men, thereby proclaiming true Christian liberty. So there! People ought to be applauding you as a hero of conscience, not condemning you as an unruly trouble-maker. Well, not so fast. This is, after all, a thing indifferent. You can't get around that. Whatever theological arguments you're going to come up with for why your practice might be *better* and *more appropriate*, it's improbable that you are going to show that it is commanded by God. Accordingly, in such a situation, you are exalting your own private judgment as a higher authority than the judges whom God has placed in a position to make such decisions, and that, my friends, is just a more sophisticated intellectual version of "wandering and unruly license."

IV. Love and Law

But still, not so fast. Suppose I am convinced that this communion practice is so ill-advised that it is spiritually destructive. Ok, that stretches credulity, even for the crankiest Presbyterian, so let's switch to a different example. Let's consider worship music, since this is an area where passions do often run high. Suppose I am convinced that the music our church leaders are having us sing is frivolous, irreverent, and theologically unsound—indeed, so much so that continually singing these songs is going to be very bad for our spiritual health, encouraging a "Jesus is my boyfriend" spirituality. Let's say that there is nothing out-and-out heretical about the lyrics, so it's not as if obedience to God *requires* that I refuse to sing, but let's suppose the lyrics are still very

poor and misleading, and the tunes insufferably sentimental. In such a circumstance, I conclude, I have a Christian duty not only to refrain from singing along, but to try to convince as many other congregants as possible to also refrain from participating. If the leadership seem incorrigible, maybe I even take my family and my allies and go start a new church. This sort of thing happens probably nearly every day somewhere in America.

How are we to evaluate such an action? I am not, after all, acting out of obedience to some specific biblical command—“Thou shalt not sing any hymns containing only three chords”—but I am seeking to follow several general biblical commands, and hopefully foremost among them the command to love my neighbor. Convinced that my fellow Christians (perhaps beginning with my own family) are being spiritually harmed by the poor worship practices, I have a duty to exercise my Christian liberty for their benefit, which in this case requires taking a stand. Such a concern with love as the law which determines our exercise of liberty is indeed woven throughout the Dutch articles. Consider article II quoted above: “man abuseth the benefit of Christian liberty . . . who . . . doth not endeavour to edify the conscience of his brother.” Moreover, before that bombshell article IX, with its insistence that the use of indifferent things can be limited by “ecclesiastical or civil decree,” was article VIII, which states,

Generally, the use of these indifferent things is restrained by the law of charity, which is universal. This is belonging to all men, and to all things, and plainly forbidding, that nothing, otherwise indifferent and lawful, be done, whereby thy neighbour is destroyed; or that any thing be omitted, whereby he may be edified.

How then to reconcile these two articles? As a contemporary document, Archbishop Matthew Parker’s *Briefe Examination for the Tyme*, put it regarding things indifferent, “when he [the Christian] commeth to the use and action of them, then must he moderate and qualifie his libertie, accordyng to charitie toward his neyghbour, and obedience to his Prince. So though by this knowledge his mynde and conscience is alwayes free; yet his doying is as it were tyed or limited by lawe or love.” Law *or* love? It sounded so simple. But what if law and love were in conflict with one another? What if

either church leaders or civil authorities commanded Christians to do things which, while not necessarily sinful *per se*, were in practice deeply destructive and harmful? The Reformers' most common answer to this question was that being contrarian and divisive was likely to be more destructive and harmful to the community than any sub-par practice. This was the argument that Richard Hooker spelled out in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*:

I am not saying that men should do anything that their hearts tell them not to do, but of one thing they should be convinced: that in such legal disputes, it is the will of God that such men should submit to a final, judicial sentence. Even if the decision seems to be utterly at odds with what is right in their private opinion, as doubtless the decisions made among the Jews often seemed to at least one side, yet God allowed them to do that which in their private judgment seemed (and perhaps even was) against the Law. For if God is the author, not of confusion, but of peace, then he must be the author, not of our refusal, but of our willingness to submit to some definitive sentence. Without this, we will never avoid confusion or reach a lasting peace. What would have been the point of the council of Jerusalem if, after the decision was made, men simply continued defending their former opinions? Instead, after the decision was made, the debates ended. Matters were disputed before the final sentence was made; afterwards men were not to argue, but to obey. The judicial sentence ended their strife, as their previous disputes never could. This was good enough grounds for any reasonable man's conscience to obey, regardless of his private opinion in that matter. We are so prone to willfulness and self-liking that strife will never end, unless we abide by some sort of definitive sentence, which once given, must stand, and a necessity of silence imposed on both parties. (*Laws* Pref.6.3)

Of course, the Puritans whom Richard Hooker opposed had their own kind of "definitive sentence" in mind. Feeling that it was intolerable for the Christian to be left poised between the need to love his neighbor by peaceably obeying the authorities and to

love his neighbor by protesting superstitious and harmful practices, they increasingly concluded that God would not have left the Church in such a state. After all, even if we are justified by faith alone, saving faith never remains alone but reveals itself in works of love. We cannot please God, reasoned the Puritan Thomas Cartwright, except by obedience, and how could we know what obedience looked like if there was so much room for dispute in things indifferent? It seemed clear that the Church *needed* detailed guidance in all its practices, and since God must love and favor His church, it stood to reason that he *must* have provided such guidance in Scripture. Scripture itself was the “definitive sentence” that must put an end to all our quarrels. Scripture itself must be the only norm for the right way to take communion or the right kind of church music or whether to observe a church calendar, etc. Of course, this implied that all the things that had been taken to be “indifferent” were not indifferent after all—hardly anything of any importance could be. Things were either commanded or forbidden, so the Christian did not need to wrestle in agonized struggles of conscience which course of action was most loving to his neighbor but must simply follow the clear commands of Scripture.

Needless to say, this twist, which was known as the “regulative principle of worship,” hardly helped matters. For one could hardly make Scripture speak clearly on a matter simply by demanding that it *must*. In reality, the stubborn fact remained that Scripture failed to provide detailed guidance on any number of areas of worship or Christian life in general. But the insistence that it must in fact address such matters simply raised the stakes of disagreement immeasurably. No longer was disagreement simply a matter of different prudential judgments as to what course of action was most loving under the circumstances; rather, it became a litmus test as to whether one really took Scripture seriously, and indeed really loved God at all. Rather than providing a definitive sentence to put an end to schisms and divisions, this approach simply succeeded in generating a never-ending sequence of church splits right down to the present day, particularly in America.

Although nineteenth-century Presbyterians such as James Henley Thornwell and more recently David VanDrunen trumpet this approach as the faithful application of the principle of Christian liberty, it actually has a tendency to effectively undermine the doctrine. After all, if Christian liberty is above all about the freedom of the justified

conscience before God, set free from all fearful works-righteousness, such a sense of freedom is hardly likely to be sustained in an environment where one feels that one might be tripping over some divine line in the sand in whatever direction one turns.

V. Christian Liberty Today

How then should we approach the doctrine of Christian liberty today? After all, most of us probably have little wish to go back to the environment of Elizabethan England, where uniformity was prized above all and Christian liberty meant little more than patiently accepting the policies prescribed by authorities in church and state, and suppressing one's private judgment. Sectarianism and individualism are real problems in modern American Christianity, but presumably the solution does not lie in insisting that no one can ever leave a church with which they are profoundly dissatisfied, or try to persuade others to do so. Nor, to come back to the examples with which I began this paper, do we want churches in which ministers prescribe from the pulpit what foods they think Christians ought to eat or what exactly married couples can and can't do in the bedroom.

Neither, however, do we want a church in which such questions are treated as off-limits, where any attempt to determine the appropriate shape of Christian behavior is seen as a violation of Christian liberty. And here is where I think that a recovery of the Reformational doctrine of Christian liberty is urgently needed. Because Christian liberty was above all an inward affair, a recognition that one's standing before God was secure by faith, and not an invitation to external license, the proclamation of Christian liberty was not seen as an obstacle to moral reasoning or to communal identity and agency. As Luther put it in *The Freedom of a Christian*, "A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth; rather he lives only for others and not for himself. To this end he brings his body into subjection that he may the more sincerely and freely serve others." This summons to service of others demands constant and careful moral reasoning to determine what the law of love requires of us in any circumstance. And this reasoning, the Reformers were convinced, was not primarily the task of the individual *qua* individual (even if there were times when one must say

“Here I stand. I can do no other”), but the task of the community, which in their time meant the community acting through its duly appointed authorities.

Now, a couple things have changed dramatically since the sixteenth century—and in part due to the legacy of the Reformation, though that is more than we can explore here. First is the way in which we organize authority in our societies. To be sure, in part we suffer from a collapse of the concept of authority altogether, but in part we are the beneficiaries of a greater ability at self-government, the result of broader education and literacy. Authority is not so top-down and unquestionable as it was for them, and as they were convinced it must be to prevent anarchy. We have more opportunities to deliberate together, in both church and state, about the most edifying use of our liberty. But we do still have a responsibility to engage in such deliberation, and to submit ourselves to the conclusions of it, rather than simply checking out and acting however seems fit to us.

The second thing that has changed is the sense of the importance of uniformity. For almost everyone in the sixteenth century, Protestant and Catholic, it seemed very desirable and important to have uniformity of practice within a particular church or commonwealth as much as possible. Indeed, both Reformation and Counter-Reformation largely agreed that the chaotic local variations that had characterized much of the late medieval church were a problem that needed rectifying. Thus it was that Hooker and others could conclude that any violation of uniformity was likely to be more unloving to the community than patiently bearing with an unedifying uniformity. In time, however, the irrepressible diversity that the Reformation had unleashed began to soften such attitudes and cultural expectations, so that it was not the end of the world if the church next door did things rather differently. Within such an environment, we can naturally apply a somewhat different calculus to the question of, “Will we do more harm by leaving this church and starting a new one than by staying here and accepting these bad practices?” But we still need to ask the question. And if we ask it seriously and earnestly, we may still find that the answer is, “Stick it out patiently where you are,” much more often than we would like.

For Christian liberty is not a wandering and an unruly license, but the summons to serve God and neighbor as priests and kings, ministering and judging together in the

household of God that we may all together be conformed more and more to the image of His Son.